

Illegal Immigration

The Mexican Way of Self-Esteem

BY BRENDA WALKER

Sam Quinones is known as a book author who has explored the roads less traveled in Mexican culture, far away from the sunny beaches and first-world resorts designed for the tourist trade. His first book, *True Tales from Another Mexico* (review in TSC, Fall 2005), illuminated the sometimes scruffy underbelly of the nation, from low-rent drag queens in Mazatlan to an assortment of colorful criminals, including a drug smuggler who became an iconic narco-corrido singer and a rustic village that briefly turned into a lynch mob. A reader couldn't ask for any more diversity than that.

His most recent offering, "Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream," has less twisted subject matter, with fewer violent thugs featured and more

aspirational law-breaking of the illegal immigration kind. This approach is a change of pace from Quinones' previous book which definitely had chapters that walked on the wild side as the author flirted with danger. This time, the goal is the trappings of middle class life.

The same format remains of telling personal stories chapter by chapter. But the edge provided by roadside murders and extra-legal executions is gone. In its place is a desire on the part of Mexicans to improve their lifestyles and thereby increase their feelings of self-worth. They believe they can only prove themselves as manly men by traversing north to earn a pile of money and then coming home

to show off among their peer group. It's the Mexican way of self-esteem.

In a radio interview about the book, Quinones compared this urge with Americans wanting to put their best foot forward when attending a high-school reunion. It was a nice attempt at relevance, but most Americans do not engage in illegal activities (e.g. border busting, identity theft, ID forgery) in order to acquire the manifestations of success. So Quinones doesn't let logical inconsistencies get in the way of his self-help fables.

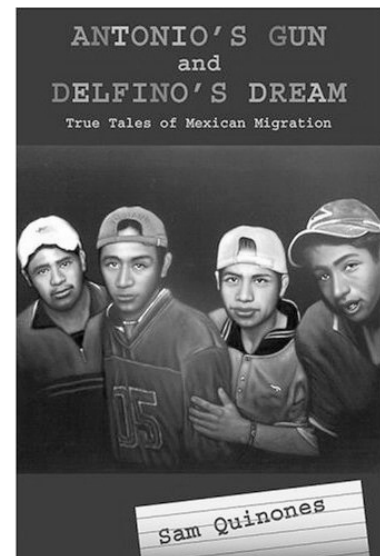
The book is downright psychological in its concern with Mexi-

Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream **True Tales of Mexican Migration**

by Sam Quinones

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cans feeling good about themselves.

As a result, otherwise important items like legality are given short shrift. The word "undocumented" appears occasionally, but rarely. No bad vibes about borders or lawbreaking here. It's all about the empowerment. Once a pueblo boy gets himself the latest DVD player and a humongous pickup truck, he can hold his head high during annual reunions in the homeland. The author appears unconcerned that America's social fabric is being shredded along the way.

In one instance of sentimentalizing Mexicans' favorite crime, Quinones applauded his young hero's decision to cross the border illegally [p 34]: "Break dancing and emigrating had a lot in common Both required the daring to step beyond life's limits and demonstrate one's abilities." You know,

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kind of like *Outward Bound*.

In another case, a small-town boy was presented as an example of the sort of self-realization that working as a human smuggler can bring:

One night, driving a group of illegals into Birmingham, Alabama, his car broke down; [Diez] calmly walked them all night along the highway into town. This kind of accomplishment was liberating and left him trusting his own abilities. [p. 147]

One chapter concerns the return of the so-called Tomato King, Andres Bermudez, to his home town. He had broken into America via a car trunk in 1974 and worked his way up from a picker in the fields to a wealthy landowner in Winters, California, near Sacramento.



But it was not enough for him to return home and flaunt his American wealth, acquired from his success in agribusiness: he decided to run for mayor. He was essentially saying, “I’m a rich man in America now, and I can run this town

better than you people.” The sociological constellation of what the Bermudez adventure indicates is complex, but certainly contains the assumption on the part of Mexicans that their countrymen in El Norte should send money and help save them in other ways as well. Even buffoonish braggarts can be welcomed as small town saviors, as Bermudez’ electoral success in becoming mayor demonstrated.

The Tomato King’s tale of striving had all the usual elements of accomplishment balanced with loss, but writ extra large, like his perverse appetites. That description may seem unkind, but a man who brags about having three wives does not deserve normal respect. Quinones mentioned Bermudez’ felonious bigamy in passing, no big deal. One wife in

Winters, one in Watsonville and still another in Jerez, Mexico. People are sentenced to prison in California for bigamy, but apparently the seriousness of the offense was lost on the author, who treated it as



more wackiness from a colorful character.

Bermudez was ultimately a failure as Jerez mayor mostly because he didn’t want to do the actual job. He craved the attention the title brought, particularly the approving press coverage from the *New York Times* and other American media. The Times adores its illegal alien tales of plucky success, and the Tomato King augmented the standard template by the added twist of his returning in triumph. From miserable urchin to VIP: Bermudez’ actual lack of aptitude for the governing part of politics was less important than the dramatic arc.

The book is full of human stories that are compassionately told. Some of the people are genuinely admirable, like the unassuming but musically dedicated woman who became the celebrated star of Tijuana’s opera stage after decades of study and singing in church. Amazingly, there are Mexicans working to improve their country and their own lives without mooching off the United States, although the reader won’t forget that the subtitle of the book is *True Tales of Mexican Migration*.

However, it would be nice if Sam Quinones saw America as more than a stage for his hispanic psycho-dramas. Some of us live here. ■

